Internet Public Access in Public Libraries: the Additional Role toward Information Society

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Abstract

It will be worth providing to access to the networked information resources and to instruct the Information Literacy through the public libraries. This paper surveys the Internet Public Access service and user instruction in the U.S. public libraries. 80 public libraries in the U.S. were surveyed in October 1998, using questionnaire about instruction. Majority of them have been providing Internet Public Access and user instructions concerning the Internet use, and they have provided user instruction about "how to use", but few have provided about knowledge of the Internet itself or "netiquette". They recognize that they should provide how to use or skills on equipment and the present user instruction is not enough for every people to learn and get the Information Literacy Skills to survive through emerging Information Society.

Keywords: public libraries, Internet Public Access, information literacy, user instruction

1. Introduction

The networked information resources, especially the Internet, have much various but uncertain information that are not under the control, and they are made or provided by a large number of various people than in traditional printed information resources. And the problem, called "Information Rich, Information Poor", which means the gap of information "have" and "have not", is very serious problem. Such gap causes a situation that not every people have the tools and skills needed for access to the networked information.

Therefore, public institutes are challenging to provide the way to access the networked information resources for the purpose of decreasing the gap of "have" and "have not". Public libraries are the forum of information, and have been traditionally providing the information and its usage skills. And now, public libraries are recognized as a place providing the equipment and knowledge to the networked information resources.

2. Networked Information and Public Libraries

2.1 Public Access to the Networked Information Resources in Public Libraries

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto [1] shows that "the public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its user", and "collections and services have to include all types of appropriate media and modern technologies as well as traditional materials".

Access to Electronic Information, Services, and Networks [2], An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, shows that "electronic information, services, and networks provided directly or indirectly by the library should be equally, readily and equitably accessible to all library users". And it recommends that "libraries and librarians exist to facilitate the exercise of these rights by selecting, producing, providing access to, identifying, retrieving, organizing, providing instruction in the use of, and preserving redropped expression regardless of the format or technology."

The Internet is different from the traditional information as printed media, and has some new problems. The "Information Poor", is the problem because people who had not got information because of lack of skills or knowledge. Information resources on the Internet are uncertain and changeable, and need the equipment and knowledge, for example the computers, connections, any cost to access, and computer skills or information literacy.

Essentially, libraries - especially public libraries - exist to provide the information equally to all. Therefore, libraries should provide to access to the networking information resources such as Internet. The service to provide the public access to the Internet through the library's environments is called "Internet Public Access". This service includes providing every library user equipment and instructions for getting the information via the Internet.

2.2 Role of Public Libraries to Internet Public Access

Public libraries provide some services and information resources for all community members. In public libraries, the service can be provided equally, readily and equitably. At the same time, because public libraries must provide the instructions that needed for the effective use of library's equipment, they will provide the instructions concerned the Internet use and its information, as the instruction for the Information Literacy Skills.

Information Literacy Skills define that, the abilities to know when there is a need for information, to identify information for that need, and to be able to locate, to evaluate and to use information effectively , then they are not new abilities that have emerged as a result of the Information Age. [3] Certainly, these abilities are necessary for effective use of the Internet's information, too.

3. Survey of Internet Public Access in the U.S. Public Libraries

3.1 Previous Studies' Result in the U.S. Public Libraries

The Internet Public Access had already provided in the U.S. public libraries and there were some previous studies about the Internet Public Access. Now, over 80% of U.S. public libraries are providing the Internet Public Access. For example, the result of 1998 NCLIS's survey [4] shows 93.2% of libraries plan to provide Internet Public Access by 1999, but 42.7% of libraries providing the Internet Public Access had only one graphical terminal, and 80% of them offered less than 4 terminals.

In the U.S. public libraries, the Internet Public Access services have been recognized and disseminated. People need to get the skills - the Information Literacy. An interpretation of Library Bill of Rights shows that every user had the rights to be provided by the instructions that they need.

3.2 Survey of User Instructions for Internet Use in the U.S. Public Libraries [5]

3.2.1 Methods

This survey aims to find the provided instruction elements and to understand the opinion or intention what public libraries are planning to do instruction and what elements need to the instruction.

The objects of this survey were selected by Statistical Report 1997[6], on condition that provide the Internet access directly by patrons, and provide the Internet access from outside the library. One hundred sixty nine libraries have been identified. The questionnaires about following 6 research categories

were sent by mail on August 1998, then eighty questionnaires were returned by October 1998.

1. The number of terminals for Internet Public Access
2. Receive or not receive any supports from other institutes for Internet Public Access
3. Provide or not provide any user instructions for Internet use, and about its instructors and elements
4. Opinions concerning present adequacy of user instructions' elements
5. Opinions concerning future needs of user instructions' elements
6. Receive or not receive any supports from other institutes for user instructions

On this survey, the populations of legal service area of public libraries were classified into 3 groups - LARGE, MIDDLE and SMALL. The ratio of number of groups is close to the ratio of identified libraries, proved with p<0.05.

3.2.2 Results

The number of terminals for Internet Public Access is in an average of 46 and maximum number is over 500, having the median at 15.5. Only 3 libraries provide only one terminal and 35 libraries (43.8% of all) provide 10 or fewer terminals for the public. Quantitatively, LARGE group - urban libraries - provides many terminals than the others, but SMALL group provided more number of terminals per 10,000 populations.

92.4% of all libraries provide the user instructions concerning the Internet use. The instruction were classified 4 categories: (1) Class (Basic / Advanced), (2) Online Tutorial (Basic / Advanced), (3) Handouts, (4) One-on-One Reference. The instruction provided the most is One-on-One Reference in over 80% of libraries surveyed. 72.6% of surveyed libraries provide the basic class, and 68.5% provide handouts. Except One-on-One Reference, which is a part of reference service, 82.5% of all libraries provide user instruction for Internet use by themselves.

Table 1 shows which kind of following 9 elements are provided in each instruction.

A) what is the Internet
B) what kind of the Internet services
C) merit and demerit
D) "Netiquette" - manner on the Internet
E) how to use the terminal
F) how to use the browser
G) how to use other software
H) (e.g. e-mail)
I) how to search by using the Search Engine
J) how to search by using other tools

Table 1
The kind of instruction elements in each category

	Num.	Class		Online Tutorials		Handouts
		Basic	Advanced	Basic	Advanced	
Num. of Libraries	73	53	26	18	10	50
A What's Internet	58	86.3%	7.7%	33.3%	0.0%	36.0%
B Internet Services	50	73.6%	42.3%	38.9%	20.0%	40.0%
C Merits & Demerits	40	49.1%	38.5%	16.7%	0.0%	18.0%
D Netiquette	33	37.7%	23.1%	22.2%	0.0%	18.0%
E How to Use Terminals	58	79.2%	30.8%	22.2%	0.0%	26.0%
F How to Use Browser	64	92.5%	46.2%	61.1%	10.0%	40.0%
G How to Use Software	28	26.4%	23.1%	16.7%	0.0%	12.0%
H Search by Search Engine	62	79.2%	57.7%	50.0%	20.0%	34.0%
I Search by Other Tools	39	45.3%	42.3%	27.8%	10.0%	22.0%

Many libraries provide the elements as A, B, E, F, and H - about Internet and how to use equipment. The class has provided the elements concerned the Internet and its services, and every category have provided how to use and search. While, few had provided about Netiquette or use.

Figure 1 and **Figure 2** show the library's opinions of the adequacy of present instruction and future needs. In order, Score 1 means very adequate or important, and Score 5 means very inadequate or unimportant. Many elements were recognized as an important element, especially how to use the terminal or browser or how to search. Nearly 90% of all libraries recognize these elements was necessary in the instruction for Internet use, and the half or more libraries recognize the elements about the Internet itself, as well. Thus, the U.S. public libraries think that these elements are the necessary elements of the user instruction for Internet use, but Netiquette is less important.

In the U.S. public libraries, user instructions for Internet use have been provided as Internet Public Access service. Most kind of instructions has already been provided, which includes the elements about the how to use and search. Then, it is concluded that the U.S. public libraries provide the instruction for "how to use".

3.3 Comparison with other countries

Public libraries realize the role of the gateway to the networked information resources in the U.S. Other counties have been in the process of developing for Internet Public Access service. In UK, 16.8% public library authorities had provided Internet Public Access service. [7]
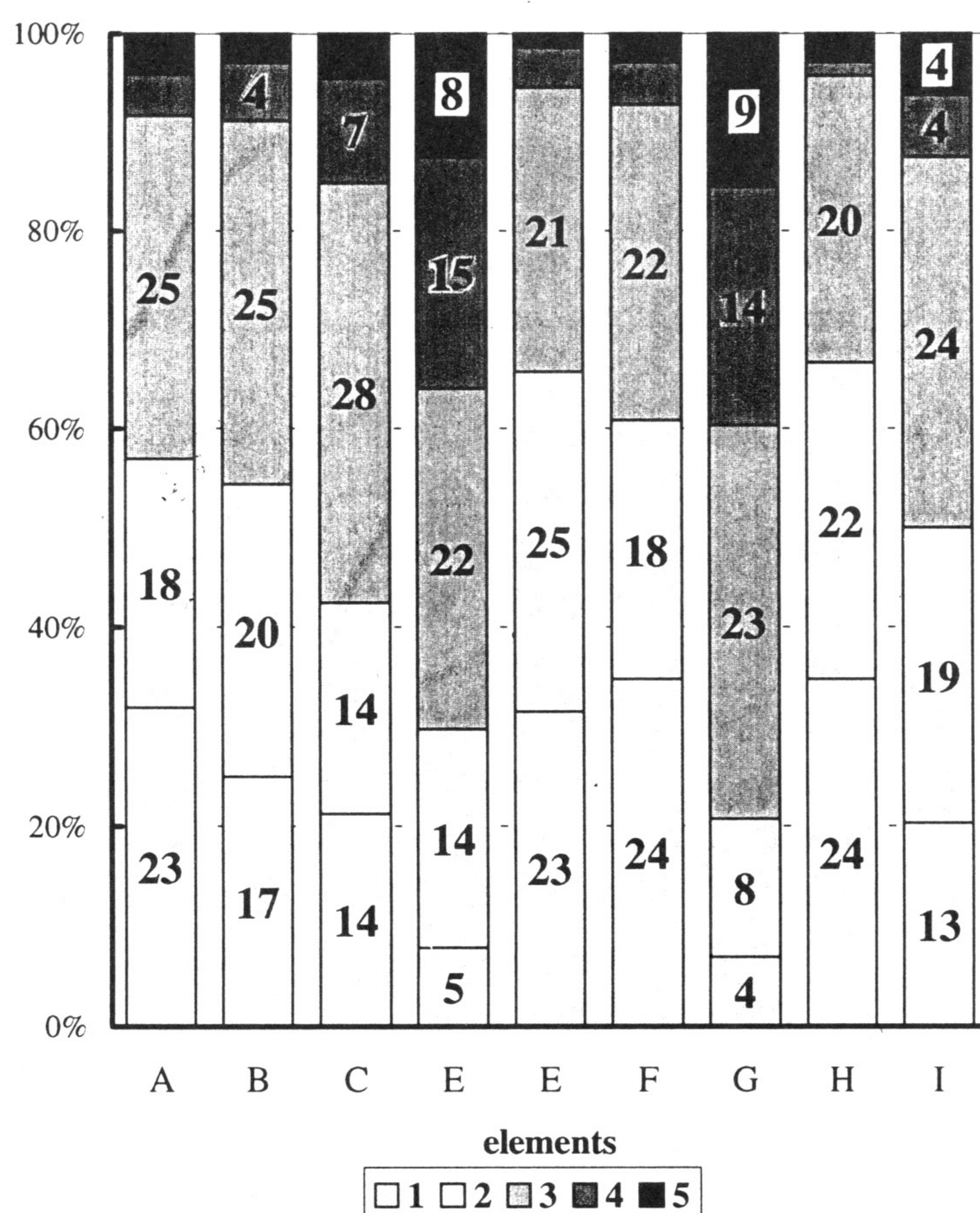
Figure 1
Adequacy of present instructions
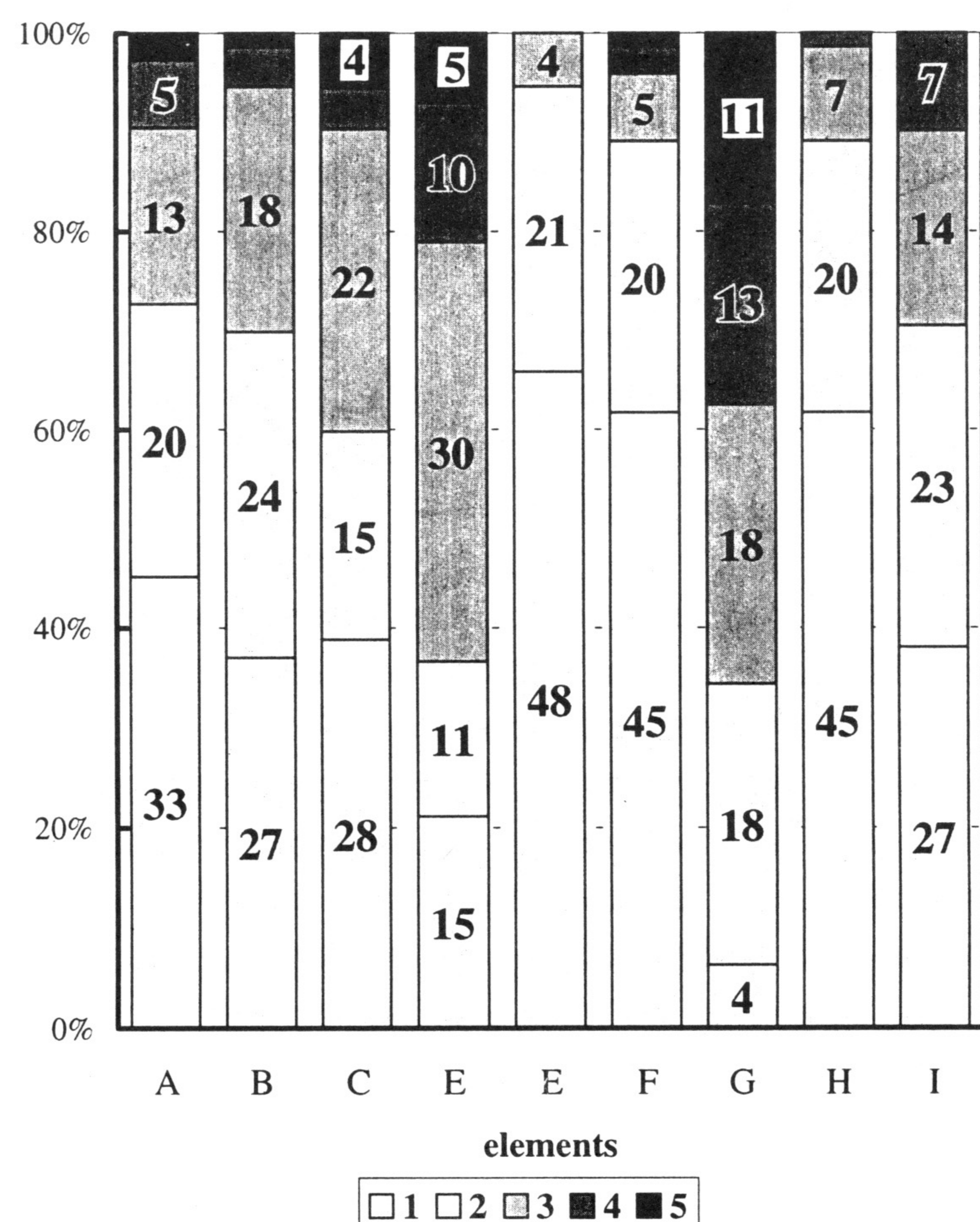
Figure 2
Importance for future instructions

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In Japan, Only 3.5% public libraries had provided Internet Public Access, and 78% of them have provided the instruction how to use the Internet. But only 27.6% libraries had trained their staff about new information services, half of public libraries are wishing for the staff trainings about new information services. [8]

In Victorian public libraries, which have been leading Australian public libraries, 90.5% of Victorian public libraries have provided Internet Public Access services, and the number of terminals for Internet Public Access is in an average of 7.8. About half of public libraries have offered the instruction concerning Internet use, and 38.9% of them have dedicated the computer training facilities. All libraries providing the instruction have provided the introductory Internet using instructions, and 26.3% of them have provided the advanced instructions. [9]

Many countries have been in the part on the way to develop Internet Public Access services, and do not provide enough instruction as yet. Then, it is important that they have recognized the value of instruction for Information Literacy.

4. Present Role of the U.S. Public Libraries

It is significant that public libraries provide the equipment and knowledge in order to decrease the gap of "have" and "have not", and majority of U.S. public libraries are in adequate to the gateway that people are able to survive in emerging "Information Society". Through the present instructions, people can get knowledge of "open the door" to the networked information. Therefore, to use the information more effectively, people should get "the Information Literacy Skills". Unfortunately, no instruction including enough to fulfill the Information Literacy Skills has been provided in public libraries at present.

To use information effectively, the skills to locate, to evaluate and to organize the relevant information are needed more and more. As traditional library had provided user skills how to use library collections with user instruction, library should have additional role that provide user skills to use the networked information. That is not only how to use the equipment but also knowledge about networked information and the network world. In the U.S. public libraries, they have already done a part of such additional role providing the skill how to use. But it is far from ideal level, and the other countries stay far below the level of U.S. public

libraries. And now, it is indispensable to provide the comprehensive instructions, not only skills but also the knowledge of information society.

Public libraries are one of the institutes to serve each parson equally and equitably. So, public library should be the gateway and should challenge willingly to provide the Information Literacy Skills, which produces the "Survival Skills" in the emerging Information Society.

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